

Lyons Inquiry Interim Report and Consultation Paper: Questions asked in the report

1. What is the strategic role of local government? Is my description sufficient, or are there more elements you would add?

We are pleased to see the definition of local government's strategic role as relating primarily to place making. Our consultation with local residents (see **Blackpool Citizen's Panel – Survey Three**) demonstrates their concerns and priorities as to what they would like the Council to do to improve their neighbourhoods. We would like to extend this definition to cover our role in development of city regions and other regional developments. Another key challenge for Blackpool relates to balancing the needs/aspirations of residents and those of visitors to our town – an additional dimension within the concept of place making.

This strategic role will, however, vary significantly between councils, based on the degree of challenges that they face. For example, Blackpool is facing real difficulties in improving our local economy. Although annual claimant unemployment rates, by historical standards, are relatively low, a key feature of the local labour market is the substantial seasonal fluctuation with winter unemployment numbers normally peaking at some 50% over the previous summer total. Worklessness within the working age population is higher than regional and national figures with as many people again recorded as economically inactive but 'wanting' a job (7.0%) as there are people classified as economically active but unemployed (7.3%). In addition, Blackpool is one of the top 30 districts of Great Britain for its high proportion (13.1%) of working age adults claiming incapacity benefits (DWP 2004). Fewer people are employed in higher paid occupations than is the case nationally. The average weekly wage in Blackpool is £100 less than the average for Great Britain and £75 less than the regional average. Average annual earnings are the 4th lowest of any local authority in the UK and GVA for Blackpool is only 72% of the level recorded for the UK. We will only break this cycle by radically changing Blackpool's economy and we will not make the required shift by traditional economic development approaches alone.

2. What tools do councils need to perform the strategic role more effectively?

A recognition of individual circumstances and challenges would allow us to perform our strategic role more effectively. Nationally, our resource-base and priorities are based on our resident population of 142,700. However, as a major national tourist destination, the nature, number and seasonality of visitors has a significant impact on our basic services, such as social care, trading standards, environmental health, waste collection and street cleaning. With some weeks/days when visitors outnumber residents it is estimated that the additional demands on services costs the Council a net sum of approximately £5 million. Whilst income from services such as parking helps to keep this figure down to £5 million, the volatility of this income is itself an issue for the Council. Even more problematic than the sheer numbers of visitors is the fluctuation of visitor numbers throughout the year, and from the week to weekends that is difficult to predict and effectively manage.

Currently, visitor data is disaggregated from national surveys to arrive at local authority figures, typically resulting in under-estimations for known tourist "hot-spots" such as coastal towns. In consequence, the numbers attributed to a town such as Blackpool are fractions of the actuality. A review of visitor indicators was commissioned by the ODPM in 2005, but revealed that there is no acceptable way of updating the data based on currently available information. This means that services such as street cleansing, waste collection and disposal, and public conveniences will continue to be underfunded in Blackpool, and local taxpayers are left to meet the additional cost.

Initiatives such as LAAs and NRF are improving partnership working in our area, providing a focus for real improvements. However, we have specific concerns relating to the short-term

nature of the funding of these programmes – often working to timescales of 2-3 years, when it will take up to 5-10 years to really make a difference. Whilst we have benefited locally from strong partnership working, much of this has been based on good will and positive relationships. It would be beneficial for local government, if this were to be put on a more formal footing with other bodies such as police and PCTs to have duties to contribute to community planning within an area.

We fully support the current dialogue in setting the future direction for local government. At present, conflicting messages and targets from different government departments, allied with uncertainty about structures, CPA and other inspections, do little to clarify our already complex agenda. We would welcome a single, clear, long-term national approach that would allow us to further develop our local arrangements.

4. Which services (or parts of services) should meet national standards in all areas of the country? Which should meet minimum standards? Which should be entirely down to local choice?

We would support the clarification of minimum standards in some service areas, with the option for areas to improve on these if appropriate to their neighbourhoods. These would work best for services relating to timescales for processing, eg benefits applications, assessments for social care, planning applications. Whilst it may be idealistically desirable, it would not be appropriate nor manageable to have national standards for outcomes eg educational attainment and workforce planning, and these areas should be excluded from a national framework. Many of these outcomes relate directly to the local circumstances faced by individual councils, eg levels of deprivation, demographics, transience.

An example of where a national target causes real local problems is the existing ODPM homeless policy. For example, of the 391 priority homeless households who presented as homeless from April to December 2005, 150 (38%) were from outside Blackpool. 90% of these were placed in temporary accommodation on that day i.e. they were homeless on that day. The ODPM has informed Councils that they must reduce the use of temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010. The average percentage in England of homeless households presenting on the day as homeless is only 25% and therefore the Government's target is, for these areas, achievable. In Blackpool's case however we will have to practically eradicate homelessness in our resident population if we are to reach the target.

5. How has the Government's approach to devolution and decentralisation affected your area and your local services?

We are pleased to say that much of the Government's approach has improved and supported our own local frameworks. The Council's Area Forums have been in operation for over three years and each of the six Forums have had a great deal of success throughout the whole borough. The numbers of the community attendees are still on the increase, which proves that Forums have a vital role to play in getting the community voices heard. In addition, the Forum has monies allocated by the council of £5,000 per ward. This devolvement of budgets is now acknowledged as good practice nationally – an example of a local initiative influencing the national agenda.

The council is developing a community engagement strategy that will draw together current methods of engagements and provide a comprehensive strategy on consulting, engaging and informing the community and also outline the criteria, capacity and resources required for the future. In order to ensure the strategy makes a real impact, it is intended that the infrastructure and delivery mechanisms will all be in place by mid 2006. Accountability, management and performance monitoring of the improvements are included and linked to the LAA as the cross-cutting theme for all key partners to embrace and support, through town-wide, multi-agency training and implementation plans.

Social deprivation is concentrated in particular areas of town where early life experiences can begin with poor health and housing, poor basic skills and low achievement of qualifications at working age. An example of where we have already made a difference to improve such deprivation is our Integrated Neighbourhood Improvement work, incorporating projects such as our National Pilot Reassurance work at Brunswick and Revoe (wards) and our Service Level Agreement development with a range of partners at Talbot and Brunswick. The ODPM also recognised the excellent work that has taken place at a partnership and community level by awarding Grange Park this Sustainable Communities Award for 2004.

The move to develop LAAs has been a move in the right direction for regional decision-making devolved from Whitehall, however this will need to develop further before it can be classed as truly devolved. In our negotiations, we have found that too often many decisions have still had to be passed to Whitehall, slowing down the approach and sometimes inhibiting our local approach.

6. How can pressures on local services be managed more effectively?

Blackpool is unique in terms of its environmental, economic and social make-up.

Coastal resorts like Blackpool struggle to win central funding for investment in infrastructure because of the inherent seasonality of their peak usage, especially when in competition with city-centres and commuter towns. Cost-benefit analysis, used to prioritise public sector funding decisions, is likely to go against areas like Blackpool with investment which pays back only over five or six months, whereas costs accrue over the full year.

At national level, there has been no revision of PPG20 and PPG21 on Coastal Planning and Tourism since 1992, and national tourism policy does not help channel investment and direct footloose tourist development to coastal resort locations. Indeed, since 1990 there has been £194m of public investment in visitor attractions in the Northwest of England. However, only a fraction of this figure came to traditional tourist areas such as Blackpool, with £150m going to Greater Manchester and £35m going to Merseyside; needless to say, concentrating public investment in this way has actually helped undermine traditional tourist areas.

In the terms of business support, the existing categorisation of tourism holds it to unfair disadvantage, as it is seemingly not considered a 'real' industry. This anomaly puts tourist businesses at a distinct disadvantage, as they are excluded from grants and other forms of assistance as they do not meet criteria. For example, Blackpool Pleasure Beach, the UK's number one free tourist attraction, brings approximately £70m spend into Blackpool on an annual basis. The company also employs circa 2,000 local full and part-time staff. However, despite the importance of this business to the local economy, it has been unable to qualify for any type of business grant or other assistance; at the same time countless smaller firms in the region receive considerable support as they are classified as differently, e.g. manufacture, business services etc.

The council is faced with a highly transient population. This significant movement across both our boundary and within it causes difficulty in gaining community identity and development in our transient neighbourhoods. Public mobility impacts on our society, with transient pupils consistently under-performing in comparison to stable pupils – attainment levels at Key Stage 4 are around half the level of our stable population. The regular movement allied with the seasonal nature of our tourism sector places increased demand on our benefits and verification framework. As such the council has sent data to central government, which highlights the significance of the problem, and is currently awaiting publication of the national transient population.